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Seuthes III and the Macedonian Invasion of Thrace

Asen Bondzhev

New Bulgarian University, Department of History, Sofia, BULGARIA

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Abstract

After Philip II conquered the Odrysian kingdom, inland Thrace was not transformed into a Macedonian province, but was put under the loose control of a strategos, which led to several Thracian revolts: in 331, 325, and 313 BC. In 325 BC, the strategos Zopyrion invaded the lands of the Getae and unsuccessfully besieged Olbia; he eventually died and lost his entire army, leading to Seuthes III raising a revolt, and Thrace being "almost completely lost". This study focuses on the life of Seuthes III: his provenance, location of his kingdom and capital Seuthopolis and his policy against the Lysimachos to prevent his access to Odrysian territories, which eventually lead of Thrace entering a period of permanent decline.

Keywords: Seuthes III, Seuthopolis, Odrysian kingdom, Lysimachus, Zopyrion, Memnon, Antipater, Thrace.

1. The Macedonian administration in Thrace

After the conquest of the Odrysian kingdom, Thrace became an important strategic territory for Philip II, providing a secure rear, troops and significant tax revenue. In order to fulfill these functions, it had to be effectively controlled. As its territory was much larger than that of Macedonia, maintaining a ubiquitous military and administrative presence was not feasible. The territory under direct Macedonian control was organized as a *strategia*, comprising mainly the lands along the Middle and Lower Hebros and Tonzos valleys, followed by the founding of "strong cities at key places" (Diod. 16.71.2): Philippopolis, Kabyle, Drongilon, Masteira, Poneropolis and Alexandropolis in Medike.[1] These cities "must have possessed the basic traits of Hellenistic *poleis* as opposed to the system of direct royal economy";[2] they were no more Odrysian royal cities.[3]

Inland Thrace was not transformed into a Macedonian province, but was put under the loose control of a *strategos*. Trustworthy local Thracian rulers were allowed to rule on Macedonian behalf, but had the obligation to pay a tithe and provide troops.[4] These troops were generally called "Thracians" or "Odrysians" and participated in the Macedonian conquest of Persia under Philip's successor Alexander III, probably commanded by Odrysian noblemen.[5] The cities

[1] Delev, 1997: 28.

[2] Delev, 1998: 379.

[3] Dimitrov, 2009: 272-273.

[4] Loukopoulou, 2011: 469.

[5] Archibald, 2010: 339; Delev, 2015a: 52.

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Correspondence: Asen Bondzhev, New Bulgarian University, Department of History, Sofia, BULGARIA.

of Philippopolis and Kabyle allowed the situation south of the Haemus to remain largely stable for the first few years, although even there Macedon never managed to impose its rule over all Thracian tribes. Because of the precarious Macedonian rule, a potential Odrysian uprising could count on the support of much of the disgruntled population.[6] Which is exactly what was about to happen.

- The failed invasion of Zopyrion almost led Macedon to lose Thrace.
- Seuthes might have been Cersobleptes' *hyparchos*.
- Seuthes' policy against Lysimachus was to prevent his access to Odrysian territories.

With his departure for Asia in 334 BC Alexander left as his governor in Europe Antipater with a sizable army at his disposal (Diod. 17.118.1; 18.12.1). Antipater must have been invested with the supreme power over all European possessions including Thrace, and the "*strategos* for Thrace" would have been his subordinate. However, in 331 BC, Memnon, the *strategos* for Thrace, revolted, presumably asserting his autonomy:[7]

> Memnon, who had been designated governor-general there, had a military force and was a man of spirit. He stirred up the tribesmen, revolted against Alexander, quickly possessed a large army, and was openly bent upon war. Antipater was forced to mobilize his entire army and to advance through Macedonia into Thrace to settle with him. While Antipater was occupied with this, the Lacedemonians thought that the time had come to undertake a war and issued an appeal to the Greeks to unite in defence of their freedom. The Athenians had been favoured beyond all the other Greeks by Alexander and did not move. Most of the Peloponnesians, however, and some of the northern Greeks reached an agreement and signed an undertaking to go to war. (Diod. 17.62.5-8)

The uprising in Greece was led by the Spartan king Agis, which forces Antipater to make a truce with Memnon and relocate his forces to Greece. Memnon eventually remained in office as late as 326 BC, when succeeded by the new *strategos* Zopyrion.

In 325 BC, Zopyrion invaded the lands of the Getae and unsuccessfully besieged Olbia (Macrob. *Saturn*. 1.11.33). Eventually he died and lost his whole army, which lead to another revolt, led by Seuthes, and Thrace being "almost completely lost" (Curtius Rufus 10.1.45). Curtius associated Seuthes with the Odrysians.

Much has been speculated about Seuthes' provenance. After the victory of Philip II over the Odrysians in 341 BC their dynasty did not disappear. Seuthes, who named himself the Third, appeared on the political scene. He might have been the one mentioned in an Athenian inscription from 330 BC, which refers to his sons Rheboulas and Cotys.[8] This indicates that he was politically active in 340–331 BC, but unfortunately, we have no information about his activities. He might have been Cersobleptes' *hyparchos*:[9]

> When Seuthes, the second-in-command of Cersobleptes, was very short of money, he sent orders to every farmer, to sow as much land as would require five *medimni* of seed. He carried the great quantity of corn, which was produced by this increase in tillage, down to the sea. There he sold it at somewhat less than the market price;

[6] Archibald, 1998: 306.

[7] Delev, 2015a: 52-53.

[8] IG II² 349 (Tod, 1948: no. 193). According to Elvers (1994: 249-250) and Dimitrov (2008: 69-72), arguments based on age, however, suggest that this might be referring to Seuthes II (405–387/386 BC).

[9] On Cersobleptes see Bondzhev, 2025a.

> which immediately brought into the treasury a very considerable sum of money. (Polyaenus 7.32)

Since Seuthes' kingdom was centered in the Upper Tonzos valley, in a secluded, inland corner of the former Odrysian territory, it has been suggested that this was a peripheral paradynastic domain that may have escaped the main thrust of the Macedonian invasion in the late 340s BC, eventually preserving some degree of autonomy.[10] Others assumed that Seuthes might have enjoyed Macedonian favor due to relations with Macedonian aristocracy or royalty acquired by marriage, either his own or that of a predecessor.[11]

2. Lysimachus against Seuthes III

Zopyrion's failure weakened Macedonian political hegemony in Thrace. Antipater's settling of 12 000 Athenians in Thrace in September 322 BC (Diod. 18.18.4-5) might be seen as an attempt to recover manpower losses and strengthen the central Macedonian control in the *strategia*.[12] After Alexander's death in 323 BC, one of his bodyguards, Lysimachus (322–281 BC), was appointed satrap of Thrace. Soon after his arrival, in the spring of 322 BC, he faced Seuthes, whose goal seems to have been the revival of an independent Odrysian state:

> Lysimachus, when he entered the Thracian region and found that the king of that country, Seuthes, had taken the field with twenty thousand infantry and eight thousand cavalry, was not frightened by the size of the army. And although he had in all no more than four thousand foot soldiers and only two thousand horsemen, he joined battle with the barbarians. In truth he was superior to them in the quality of his troops though inferior in numbers, and the battle was a stubborn one. After losing most of his own men but killing many times that number, he returned to his camp with but a doubtful claim to victory. Therefore for the moment the forces of both sides withdrew from the locality and busied themselves with greater preparations for the final conflict.[13] (Diod. 18.14.2-4)

Eventually both parties reached an agreement, restricting Seuthes to the inland regions and Lysimachus to the coastal areas of the Aegean and Black Sea.[14] There is no evidence for Lysimachus vassalizing Seuthes. Thrace north of the Rhodopes probably remained outside of Lysimachus' reach, as he may have regarded its pacification not worth the money and manpower.[15]

In 313 BC, Lysimachus had to deal with a serious revolt of the western Black Sea cities, in which Seuthes also took part. Callatis rebelled and expelled Lysimachus' Macedonian garrison; the revolt was joined by Istros, Odessos, and other Greek cities along the Black Sea coast. It seems that one of the Diadochi, Antigonus, who dreamed of acquiring Alexander's entire inheritance,

[10] Delev, 2004: 119.

[11] Tacheva, 2006: 188.

[12] Dimitrov, 2009: 280.

[13] Tacheva, (2006: 190) makes a dubious claim, stating that "Diodorus' accounts of Seuthes' army size at the battle in 322 BC seem unreal. Perhaps it should have justified both the dubious victory and the losses of Lysimachus against Seuthes. The Thracian ruler had apparently succeeded in preserving his independence, and his cause of defending Thracian lands undoubtedly contributed to the flocking of Thracians as subjects, allies or mercenaries to his military camp."

[14] Delev, 2015a: 54.

[15] Lund, 1992: 27; Archibald, 1998: 316.

incited Callatis to revolt. The alliance of the Greek colonies was joined by the neighboring Scythians and Getae.[16]

When Lysimachus learned of this, he acted quickly and decisively. He made a surprise attack on Odessos, which he subdued, then immediately headed to Istros, which he also conquered, and took on his strongest opponent, Callatis. The Getae and the Scythians could not resist him – the Thracians made peace easily, and the Scythians were defeated and driven away. But when Lysimachus learned that Antigonus has sent forces to Callatis by land and sea, he left part of his army to besiege the city and headed south against the enemy. The Haemus passes, however, were guarded by Seuthes, who allied himself with Antigonus, so Lysimachus had to fight his way through the mountains in a bloody battle, eventually defeating the Thracian army (Diod. 19.73).

Afterwards, there is no evidence for another confrontation between Seuthes and Lysimachus. The absence of Seuthes from the epic and last stand of the Balkan population against Lysimachus – the siege of Callatis, which lasted until 310 BC (see Diod. 20.25.1) – is interpreted in different ways: perhaps due to both Seuthes' advanced age and the weakening of his economic and military power;[17] or due to a supposed agreement between Seuthes and Lysimachus, concluded in or after 312 BC, which settled disputed issues satisfactorily for both sides, and thus Seuthes no longer needed to join Lysimachus' opponents.[18]

3. The Kingdom of Seuthes III

While Seuthes is generally considered a great ruler, and certainly held his own against Alexander's successors, it should be remembered that he ruled only part of Thrace and shared space with both the Macedonian Lysimachus and with other Thracian rulers (like Spartocos, the ruler of Kabyle). The size and power of this kingdom should not be overestimated, as its influence was most likely limited to the hinterland of the royal town he built at the Tonzos river, which henamed after himself – Seuthopolis.[19] The mass distribution of coins struck there under the name of Seuthes outlines this territory within the area of present-day Kazanluk, Karlovo and Chirpan.[20]

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[16] Yordanov, 1998: 181; Delev, 2004: 152. Although Diodorus (19.73) only mentions "Thracians", their identification by Hoddinott (1975: 96) with Seuthes' Odrysians is highly improbable.

[17] Tacheva, 2006: 191.

[18] Dimitrov, 2009: 286.

[19] Seuthopolis was probably built after the death of Alexander in 323 BC (Nankov, 2012: 120; Sobotkova, 2013: 136-137). Nankov (2008: 44-45) offered a date of ca. 313–310 BC, falling in the context of political events following his second encounter with Lysimachus in 313 BC or after the "Peace of the Dynasts" in 311 BC.

While Seuthopolis's excavators accept that the city was destroyed with siege engines in the 270s BC (Dimitrov & Čičikova 1978: 58), the revised date of amphorae stamps and import wares suggest a somewhat later date in the second quarter of the 3rd century BC (Stoyanov, 2006: 87; Balkanska & Tzochev 2008). Based chiefly on numismatic evidence, Tacheva (2000: 25-27, 37; 2006: 192-193) dates the city's destruction to 252 BC and associates it with the campaign of Antiochus II in southern Thrace. The use of catapults by Antiochus II is plausible and more credible than their alleged use by the Celts during one of their attacks on Seuthopolis in the 270s BC (Stoyanov, 2015: 434).

For Seuthopolis, see Dimitrov 1961; Danov, 1962; Dimitrov & Čičikova, 1978; Dimitrov et al., 1984; Velkov 1991: 7-11; Domaradzki & Taneva, 1998: 39-43; Manov, 1998; Archibald, 1999; Tacheva, 2000; 2002; 2006: 202-210; Popov, 2002: 122-134; Rabadzhiev, 2002: 10-54; Nankov, 2008; 2012; Lehmann, 2016; Chichikova & Dimitrov, 2016; Graninger, 2018.

[20] Fol 1975: 189; Youroukova, 1979: 8; Dimitrov, 1979: 76-77, 79; 1981: 59-60; 1984: 28-29; 2009: 280; Tonkova, 2002: 158. According to Lehmann (2016: 41), the borders of Seuthes' kingdom should be the valley

Figure 1. The Odrysian kingdom during the reign of Teres I, Cotys I and Seuthes III

It is accepted almost with unanimity that the period of the death of Seuthes should be estimated between 301/300 and 295 BC.[21] His final resting place is most likely the Golyama Kosmatka tomb, located 10 km north of Seuthopolis near the present-day town of Shipka. This assumption is based on the discovery of a bronze male head at the opening of the tomb's *dromos* similar in profile to the portrait depicted on the coinage of Seuthes III and assumed to represent the king; in addition, other finds from inside the tomb are inscribed with the name Seuthes.[22]

between the Rhodopes in the south to the Haemus in the north and the Syrmus in the west to the upper Tonzos in the east.

[21] Manov, 1998; 2006: 27, 33; Tacheva, 2006: 184, 194-198; 2006b: 287; Dimitrov, 2008: 67.

[22] Kitov, 2005a: 68; 2005b: 41; Nankov, 2011; Stoyanov & Stoyanova, 2016: 318-322. The latter suppose (p. 321) that the tomb was build ca. at the very end of the 4th or in the first quarter of the 3rd century BC, whereas the *dromos* and the exterior façade were constructed afterwards. Some objects found in the tomb (the inscription on the handle of the silver jug; the golden bowl-*kantharos*; the *askos*-like jug) are dated to c. 280 BC, allowing the assumption that Seuthes might have been reburied some 20 years after his death.

Figure 2. A bronze male head at the opening of the Golyama Kosmatka tomb's dromos and a coin depicting Seuthes III

After the death of Seuthes III, his wife Berenice likely became regent for his four sons, who were presumably underage.[23] At that time the decentralization of the Odrysian kingdom was even further intensified. It resisted the Celtic invasion in 279/278 BC, which emerged in Central Europe and spread to the south-east in the 3rd century BC. Celtic groups established their own kingdom in Thrace, which existed until about the twenties of the 3rd century BC, when it was finally destroyed by the Thracians.

4. Conclusion

The sources do not give reliable information about military and diplomatic actions of Seuthes III until 325 BC. The vacuum created in Thrace after Zopyrion's failure was filled by a local political structure – an independent Odrysian state, which operated outside of Macedonian control. In 322 BC Seuthes already bore the title of king and had his own territory (Diod. 18.14.2). He was able not only to navigate the rapidly changing conditions under Alexander's *strategos*, but also to react in a timely and successful manner.[24] He thus preserved his relative autonomy from the Macedonian kings and was a fierce enemy of their power-thirsty *strategoi*. With the demise of Seuthes III, members of aristocratic families, who had been in the shadow of the ruling family, appeared on the political scene. In the old dynastic territory since the time of Seuthes II in the early 4th century BC a branch of the Odrysian royal family emerged, which ruled independently and was provisionally called the Odrysian-Astaean dynasty. Thrace entered a period of permanent decline, marked by political fragmentation and a loss of centralized power.

[23] Delev, 2015b: 62; Fol, 2017: 244. *Contra* Calder, 1996: 172; Tacheva, 2006: 207. On the Seuthopolis Inscription (IG Bulg III² 1731) see: Elvers, 1994; Calder, 1996; Manov, 1998; Tacheva, 2000; 2002; 2006: 202-210; Graninger 2018.

[24] On Cotys I see Bondzhev, 2025b.

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